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SUBJECT: INTERVENTION REVIEW FUELS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL
DEBATE

REF: CANBERRA 956

¶1. (U) Summary: Sixteen months after the Australian government mounted a controversial intervention in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory to combat reported widespread sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, a review panel has concluded that the emergency remains acute and has endorsed continuation of the intervention. The review board has recommended ending a blanket income management system, reinstating the permit system used to restrict access to native land, reinstating the Racial Discrimination Act and compensating traditional owners for compulsory acquisition of their land. The report also recommended a health service delivery initiative for child and family health be made permanent with urgent priority given to ongoing treatment of children with health and dental issues identified by mandatory child health checks. Indigenous leaders and other opponents of the intervention have accused the government of watering-down criticism in the report while adding statements endorsing continuation of the intervention. The government denies interference. Indigenous leaders are bitterly divided over the recommendations. End Summary.

The Review Process and Result

¶2. (U) Established by bipartisan agreement in 2007 to conduct an independent and transparent review of the first 12 months of the intervention -- known formally as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) - the NTER Board was tasked with assessing progress in improving the safety and well-being of children and laying a sustainable basis for improvement of conditions in remote communities in the Northern Territory. For approximately three months the Board traveled throughout the Northern Territory, visiting 31 Aboriginal communities and speaking with representatives of 56 communities together with government representatives and service delivery agencies. They received over 200 public submissions. The reviewers said they focused heavily on these consultations because of the absence of sound baseline data upon which to judge progress. Despite rumors the original draft of the report was highly critical of the intervention, the final report states: "The situation in remote communities and town camps was - and remains- sufficiently acute to be described as a national emergency. The NTER should continue."

The Debate

¶3. (U) The review drew an immediate attack from some prominent Aboriginal leaders who said a tough approach needs to be maintained to reverse entrenched problems in Indigenous communities. Recommendations of the NTER include an end to a blanket income management system, under which all Aboriginal welfare payments are heavily controlled, the reinstatement of the Racial Discrimination Act, and for traditional owners to be compensated for the compulsory acquisition of their land. The architect of the intervention, previous indigenous minister Mal Brough, attacked the report, arguing that he had

always predicted the Rudd government would go soft on the intervention. Brough warned that the watering-down of compulsory income management would be dangerous for children.

Northern Territory Deputy Chief Minister Marion Scrymgour said she was concerned about plans to make income management voluntary citing a positive effect by income management on school attendance in bush communities. Arnhem Land leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu criticized the report for failing to give "any real direction". On the other side are leaders such as Northern Land Council chairman Wali Wunungmurra who supported the recommendations of the review board, arguing the Howard government's approach to the intervention breached human rights.

The Government View

14. (SBU) Prime Minister Rudd appears to have no appetite for the polarized nature of the debate, stating the government has no "ideology" on this but rather "is driven by one thing: how do you close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and what in practical terms makes that work". Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin said the government would base its decisions on the future of the intervention not solely on the review but on "a number of pieces of evidence" including the NTER Review Board report.

Comment

15. (SBU) The Australian and Northern Territory governments endorse the need to "reset" the relationship with Aboriginal communities and move to develop and maintain a community

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development framework. The reality of implementation, divided leadership, competing priorities, funding questions, and lack of quantified outcomes make this a political hot potato that has landed squarely in the lap of Minister Macklin. Indigenous people make up approximately 2.5 percent of the total population in Australia but 30 percent of the population of the Northern Territory. If successful, the direction the NTER intervention takes will determine how the government supports other state efforts to close the gap between living conditions for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

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